



# The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas

ISSN: 0009-8655 (Print) 1939-912X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/vtch20>

## Dialogues with Marilyn Cochran-Smith

Dario Fiorentini & Vanessa Moreira Crecci

To cite this article: Dario Fiorentini & Vanessa Moreira Crecci (2015) Dialogues with Marilyn Cochran-Smith, *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 88:1, 9-14, DOI: [10.1080/00098655.2014.977841](https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2014.977841)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2014.977841>



Published online: 20 Nov 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 176



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Dialogues with Marilyn Cochran-Smith

DARIO FIORENTINI and VANESSA MOREIRA CRECCI

**Abstract:** For more than 30 years, Dr. Marilyn Cochran-Smith has developed and directed research and contributed to publications about education and *practitioner research*, especially about teachers' research and learning in inquiry communities. Her primary topics are inquiry communities, teacher research, teacher education for social justice, and practitioner research. In this interview, we sought information about the trajectory of Dr. Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle's research about the teacher research movement and teacher research process, particularly learning and professional development in inquiry communities. We were also interested in her opinions about the Obama administration's education policies, especially teacher education research in the United States. This article is the full text of the interview the authors conducted with Dr. Cochran-Smith in December 2012 at Boston College.

**Keywords:** Marilyn Cochran-Smith, practitioner research, inquiry as stance, inquiry communities

## Some Preliminary Considerations

Marilyn Cochran-Smith, who began as one of an uncounted number of working-class women who aspire to higher education in the United States, became an elementary school teacher in the mid-1970s after

earning a BA and becoming certified as a K–8 teacher at the College of Wooster in 1973 (Cochran-Smith 2012). Influenced by sociocultural, critical, and emerging perspectives of qualitative and ethnographic research, she began her research career after completing a PhD in language and education at the University of Pennsylvania in 1982.

For more than 30 years she has directed research about, written about, and contributed to publications about teacher education. Her primary topics are inquiry communities, teacher research, teacher education for social justice, and practitioner research. She has published nine books and approximately 150 articles and book chapters. Four of her books have won national awards. The latest, co-authored in 2009 with Susan Lytle, is *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). Her other recent publications are focused on teacher education and public policies related to quality of education and educational reform agendas. Dr. Cochran-Smith's performance and leadership within the American scientific community is also noteworthy: She was president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 2004 and 2005 and is an elected member of the National Academy of Education in the United States. Currently she is director of the doctoral program in curriculum and instruction at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College.

---

*Dario Fiorentini is in the Faculty of Education, University of Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. Vanessa Moreira Crecci is in the Faculty of Education, University of Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil.*

One cannot talk about Dr. Cochran-Smith's work without acknowledging her intellectual partnership with Susan Lytle.<sup>1</sup> Their collaborative output includes numerous journal articles and book chapters as well as books. Of the journal articles, we would like to cite two (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990, 1999b) that were published in *Educational Researcher*. These studies address the *teacher research movement* and had great impact in the world's scientific community. Of the book chapters, we have selected two (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1999a, 2004) for their important contributions to the understanding of the relationship between knowledge and practice, and especially about practitioner inquiry and teacher learning in communities. Of the books, we highlight *Inside/Outside* (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1993) and its sequel, *Inquiry as Stance* (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009). In the first book, the authors describe and discuss the boundaries of research and practice and the configuration of relationships inside and outside schools and universities; they also examine teacher research and learning in these contexts. The term *inquiry as stance*, which they coined in the late 1990s, is taken in the second book as a central concept to signify the idea of inquiry as a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that brings a radically different view not only of the relationships of knowledge and practice but also of the role of educators as practitioner researchers in educational change.

Their experiences with the development of preservice and inservice teacher education first alerted them to the gaps between university discourse and the everyday realities of elementary and secondary schools. The dissonance between these two worlds caused them to reject the idea that "experts" outside a school community should be the primary agents of school reform. Accordingly, they became academics who are both critical of the political and social arrangements of schools and concerned about its pedagogy and classroom practices.

The full interview that was conducted with Dr. Cochran-Smith in December 2012 appears in this ar-

ticle. Our primary interest was in the trajectory of the research conducted by Cochran-Smith and Lytle about the teacher research movement and teacher research process, in particular learning and professional development in inquiry communities. We also sought Cochran-Smith's opinions about the Obama administration's education policy, especially teacher education research in the United States.

### Interview with Dr. Marilyn Cochran-Smith

**Interviewers:** How do you see teachers conducting research in academic communities?

**Cochran-Smith:** In the United States we have people who do teacher research or other kinds of practitioner inquiry projects for master's degree work and for doctoral work, so I think it is quite a legitimate approach to knowledge generation. As Susan and I argued in one of our earliest articles [Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990], the perspective of practitioners adds to but also alters what people call "the knowledge base." When insiders are systematically looking at their own practices, questioning their own assumptions, and interrogating the arrangements of schooling, it can produce knowledge that is useful for the local community but also beyond the local community.

As we said years ago, "this kind of work will alter, not just add to the knowledge base," and I believe that is still true. Therefore, I think it's a very valuable form of research. I do not think it is the only form. I do not think we should only have practitioner research and not have outside researchers anymore. Not at all. However, I think we need the insider perspective to fill out and have a richer view of practice. Therefore, I am very much an advocate of master's and doctoral students doing practitioner research. Again, not everybody should do this, but it is an important perspective.

Here are a couple of examples. One of my current students, Kirsten McEachern, is a secondary English teacher; she teaches English and journalism. She has been teaching for about 10 years and she is now gathering data for her dissertation. She teaches at an all-boys' Catholic school, where she is one of the few women faculty. Her dissertation is about gender issues and the notions of gender—the ideas about men and women, boys and girls—that get promoted in a school of all boys and almost all male faculty. In her English class she is using some novels that she has very specifically chosen because they bring up a lot of gender issues, and she's asking questions about how she and her students construct images and ideas about gender. I think that will be a very valuable contribution to the literature.

Another doctoral student of mine, Victoria Ekk, is currently finishing her dissertation. She is the principal at a middle school; she has been collecting the data of practice since 2002, when we instituted No Child Left Behind [NCLB] here in the United States. She has all of

<sup>1</sup>Dr. Lytle began her career in education as an English teacher in public secondary schools in Massachusetts and California and as a Peace Corps volunteer in Manila, Philippines. She arrived at the University of Pennsylvania in the early 1970s, where she began as a supervisor of secondary English interns, later became a faculty member, and was co-holder (with Cochran-Smith) of the Joseph L. Calihan Term Chair in Education, which she was awarded for her collaborative research on teacher inquiry. Dr. Lytle is also the founding director of the Philadelphia Writing Project (PhilWP), a teacher collaborative project with the School District of Philadelphia. PhilWP has been the primary site of her research. Committed to improving the quality of teaching and learning at all levels of education, including colleges and universities, Dr. Lytle has published widely on literacy and urban teacher education. She has worked closely with urban K-12 teachers, community college/university faculty, and adult educators to design and implement a variety of inquiry-based collaborative field-university projects focused on issues of literacy, culture, pedagogy, and social justice (see scholar.gse.upenn.edu/lytle).

the data connected to the implementation of that testing program, and she also has four or five years of her own journal entries. She has kept all her e-mails, and she has all the notes from all her meetings with faculty members. She's particularly interested in what the impact of the implementation of No Child Left Behind has been on teachers and students in her school and on the culture in her school, and in particular on special-education students [students with disabilities]. Those are two studies that I think will make really important contributions, because they bring insider perspectives. We have tons of studies of NCLB—tons of studies. But we don't have any studies, as far as we could find, that give us systematic, close, rich insider accounts of what NCLB means and what it has meant in a school, for the families of students with disabilities, for those students themselves, and so on. I think we need this kind of research in the academy and I think it enriches what we can know.

**Interviewers:** Does the kind of research change the findings in research practice?

**Cochran-Smith:** Well, I don't know. "Change" might not be the right word. Certainly, the kind of research you do prefigures and in a sense determines what you're going to find, because what questions you ask and how you ask them has everything to do with what you find. There are lots of different kinds of questions. Somebody else could have done a study of Victoria's school in terms of what impact NCLB had on the students' test scores, on the special-needs students' test scores. This would have been a very different study. How you do the research, how you ask the questions, how you frame what's important—of course those things are relevant to what you find.

**Interviewers:** You and Susan Lytle wrote: "Inquiry as stance is grounded in the problems and the contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems in the best interests of the learning and life chances of students and their communities" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009, 123). How do you think this idea of inquiry as stance can be developed by teachers in communities?

**Cochran-Smith:** I think communities are one of the few places where people really can develop inquiry as a stance, because people build on each other's ideas. Over time, communities that are inquiry communities develop norms and understandings for the group. But people in those communities don't just push each other to make conclusions; they also push each other to raise questions, to say: "Well, what do you really mean here? What assumptions are you making about your students' abilities? What expectations do you have, for example, about students who are English language learners and who are not native speakers of English?"

The communities that Susan and I have worked with and written about are communities in which the point

is to be an inquiry community, where people develop ways of working that involve drawing on data that they and others bring with them to meetings. The data might be students' writing samples, it might be students' math work of some sort, it might be documents from a school, it might be a report-card kind of document that has the criteria upon which people are evaluated. Then the group can engage in various kinds of inquiries that try to get under the surface.

**Interviewers:** What do you think about the difference between being reflective and engaging in inquiry as stance?

**Cochran-Smith:** Actually, Susan and I have talked about that for years. It's a good question. I think that people who develop inquiry as stance on their practice are being reflective. So inquiry is something bigger than reflection, but I don't think everybody who's being reflective is necessarily taking inquiry as stance. The everyday meaning of reflective or reflection is about being thoughtful, thinking about things, paying attention. Inquiry includes all of that but I think it also includes a bigger range of activities, such as being systematic about what you're reflecting on.

So I could have a bad day as a teacher, where the kids just aren't getting what I'm trying to teach them, and I can think about that on my way home: "What went wrong? What was happening there? I don't think they understood the assignment. Maybe I didn't do enough scaffolding. It was too hard. They didn't know what to do . . ." That's being reflective, I think. You're asking questions about what happened in your classroom, you're trying to be open to possibilities. You're not just assuming that because you taught it, they should have learned it. That's reflection, or that's an example of reflection.

If I'm engaging in inquiry as stance, I might be asking questions about the nature of assignments but I might be doing it in a much more systematic way. For example, one of my students asked an inquiry question about what kind of intellectual work the small groups in his class were actually accomplishing. He asked that question because he was a student teacher. In the classroom where he was learning to teach, the lead teacher used these small groups and this student teacher didn't think these small groups were necessarily so good. It was a social studies class; they were trying to use primary documents, historical documents. And so the question he wanted to explore in my class was about the intellectual work that was or was not accomplished there. He figured out a way to do it systematically. He tape-recorded small-group discussions and he collected their work, their note taking, and their process work as well as their final products. He looked across groups, he compared one day to the next; that kind of thing. And—surprisingly, to him—he discovered that they actually were accomplishing some pretty sophisticated intellectual work most of the time and that even when

they were not precisely and directly on the intellectual task, that some of the side talk was actually functioning to support the larger talk.

To me that's an example of a more extended inquiry as opposed to, let's say, the same person thinking on the way home: "Why didn't my lesson go well?" So, as I said, I think that reflection is inside inquiry and that you can't have an inquiry stance without being reflective. But you can be reflective without doing inquiry.

**Interviewers:** How can teacher-education policies promote teacher education based on the concept of inquiry communities? Would this be possible on a large scale, with all teachers who work in schools?

**Cochran-Smith:** That's also a really interesting question. There are some places where this is being done on a larger scale. But here's the problem: Just because you require that teachers come together in something that you call communities (now they are more likely to call them professional learning communities), that doesn't mean they're going to engage in inquiry. In Singapore, for example, the vast majority of teachers are required to work in professional learning communities in their schools. Last summer, I went to Singapore and did a workshop for principals. They were talking about how they are required to have their teachers meet in these professional learning communities, but some of what was happening in those communities wasn't really useful or helpful. Just because people come together and are told "be a learning community" doesn't mean they will be.

Victoria Ekk and I also talked about how in her school district they were required to have professional learning communities. She was already doing inquiry, so she basically took the structure that was now required but made it inquiry. But what makes it inquiry? To me, what makes it inquiry is that questions come from the practitioners, the teachers, instead of questions being imposed on them. There is active questioning of assumptions, interrogation of assumptions of common practices; there is an attempt to be systematic; there is a thoughtful consideration of multiple perspectives. In some places here in the United States they require professional learning communities and they see them as places where teachers can look at test data and then figure out how to raise their test scores.

In my view, you could have an inquiry community that considers test scores but they would be considered from a very different perspective—one that's critical, that's systematic, that connects it to larger things. Generally speaking, inquiry communities could be mandatory. But when everything is imposed top down, it doesn't work in the way we have thought about inquiry communities.

**Interviewers:** You mentioned Singapore. Do you know if there had been a discussion about communities before their implementation with teachers?

**Cochran-Smith:** I think the practice just sort of became required at some point—as the latest good practice. Some principals knew a lot about it, but many others didn't. I think a lot of teachers didn't. A range of things was happening in these communities but mostly they were not terribly productive; at least, that is what people told me when I worked with them in Singapore. Most of the teachers who engaged in them didn't think they were so productive. I had a student last year in my class on inquiry who was getting his master's; he was a Singaporean teacher and he was very excited about what we were doing because he was a department chair in his school and he wanted to go back and use the ideas we worked on to really rethink and reinvent what was happening in those professional learning communities.

To me, whatever they're called—teacher learning communities or inquiry communities or professional learning communities—doesn't necessarily tell you how they operate. People use the language very differently. That's one thing. And the second thing is, those kinds of learning communities aren't good or bad per se. It depends on what's happening in them. I have always said that if you're having an inquiry community, you're inquiring about *something*. But the group itself, the way it's sometimes implemented, it's just an empty structure. All sorts of things can happen in those communities, some of them positive and some of them not.

**Interviewers:** In a context in which 46 percent of teachers abandon the profession in the first five years [according to Ingersoll and Smith 2003] how can the commitment to social justice become part of teachers' beliefs?

**Cochran-Smith:** I think that that's just part of the context. In the United States we have a context in which retention is a big problem, where there is a testing and accountability regime that really controls much of what goes on in the schools. We have a context in which I think the public, to a great extent, does not value the work of teaching and teaching is not a high-status position. We have a context in which there are growing inequities in terms of opportunity and outcomes between white, middle-class students and their counterparts who are immigrants, who are minorities, and so on. And of course another part of that context is changing patterns of migration.

So then your question becomes: "How could a commitment to social justice be part of teaching in a context like that?" Well, I don't think it's so easy. I think a lot of people go into teaching because they want to change things. In all the years I've been a teacher educator, and it's now more than 30 years, that's the answer I have heard more than any other when I ask people why they want to teach. They don't say, "because I'll have the summer off," although maybe they think that. Mostly they say, "I want to make a difference. I want to be something in kids' lives that will really have an impact."

I think when people come into teaching, they do see it as a profession that's about service and about transformation of people's lives and opportunities. But then, I think, because of all those contextual pieces I was just trying to spell out, it's very hard to hold onto that commitment to social justice. As a matter of fact, I think that inquiry communities are one of the ways people can get support for holding on, because they're holding on in a group. Some teacher groups become activist groups. Many don't, but some do. A few schools even become social-justice-oriented themselves. So I think we need to do a lot more to nurture the core inclination that people bring with them when they want to go into teaching.

Some of that is changing too, though, because in the United States, unfortunately, we have this growing movement of people entering teaching with the intention of not necessarily staying very long. And I think that makes a big difference. Unless we treat teaching as a profession, and unless we work harder to change this negative viewpoint about teachers, I think it will be pretty hard [to retain committed teachers]. Now, in some countries they do this well. In Singapore, for example, teachers are highly regarded. In Finland, teachers are highly regarded. . . and in Scotland, Ireland. . . But you have to put some resources into that and you have to support teachers all along the professional career trajectory. I believe we in the United States have made a lot of mistakes along these lines and I think we're going in the wrong direction. I don't think that's going to change very much very soon.

**Interviewers:** You had experience as a president of AERA. What has been the social impact of research on teacher education in public policy? In Brazil, we say "social impact" when research changes social and educational policies.

**Cochran-Smith:** Unfortunately I don't think research on teacher education has had much of an impact on policy in the United States. We have an expression, "cherry-pick," that means instead of looking at, let's say, all of the evidence from research, people pick a few studies that have results that support their own opinion or their own favorite policy. That often happens with research on teacher education. Those who are in favor of professionalization will talk about the empirical evidence that shows that how teachers are educated—how they are prepared—has more impact than anything else on students' learning. Then people who are in favor of deregulation and market-based reform policies will cite evidence that shows that teacher education does not have much of an impact at all. They just cherry-pick the evidence they want and we end up in these heated battles about what the research says. Yet if we look at all the research and we say, "what's the weight of this evidence, looking across many studies?" we usually end up with a mixed picture and cannot say, conclusively, "this is how people should be prepared."

Another part of the problem is that a lot of research has taken what I and some other people have referred to as kind of a horse-race mentality: "Which approach is going to be best? Let's see." That is not very useful. So, more recently, studies have tried to get inside and consider not only what entry path or what program structure is optimal, but also what the pieces are that have to fit together to influence the kinds of opportunities teacher candidates have, and then how all that influences outcomes for students.

**Interviewers:** In 2009 you indicated you were hopeful with the election of Democrat Barack Obama [and the state of teacher research at that time]. With the continuity of policies based on tests, how you see the relationship between research and teaching today?

**Cochran-Smith:** Interesting question. Just when we were finishing that book was when we had the first election [of Barack Obama] in 2008. We both voted for [President Obama] again in the last election. I won't speak for Susan, although I know her politics on that. With that said, I think that Obama's education agenda and his educational policies have not been good. I'm actually very disappointed in them because, as your question implies, they have really just continued and even intensified the testing regime, assuming that leading with accountability will fix things. The assumption is that more accountability is going to improve teacher quality, which is going to improve student learning. But more accountability without the support, the resources, the infrastructure, doesn't do it.

Right now, 12 states have garnered Race to the Top money [a presidential initiative], and one of them is Massachusetts. In order to have a competitive and winning application for that grant money, states had to keep many of the structures that continue their testing programs and even create new kinds of data systems. But what they want to do is link student test-score data to teacher data, very specifically link these students to this teacher, and then they want to link teacher data to teacher preparation program data so they can say: "This is a good teacher preparation program, or this is a bad teacher preparation program, based on the test scores of the students they teach." And the assumption is that that's going to be the right way to evaluate teacher preparation programs.

I don't think that's the right approach. Instead, I think there's a lot of evidence that the kinds of assessments that are being used to link teachers, students, and teacher education programs are not appropriate for high-stakes decisions about individuals, and they're probably not appropriate ways to evaluate teacher education programs either. They're measuring something; I mean, they're capturing something in the scores but probably not teacher effect. I think with teacher education, so many things happen in between the completion

of the preparation program and the performance of school students on tests. Here's the teacher preparation program, now here's the kids in school who were taught by the teacher; a million things have happened. The context is so varied and complicated and depends on so many things.

So although I voted again for Obama because I certainly prefer his policies on many, many things to those of the opposition, I do not agree with his education policies. As far as the impact his policies are having on research and teaching today, unfortunately I think they're reinforcing the idea that there are best ways and right ways to do things, that we can prove that this is the right way to do it, and then we can just tell everybody else to do it this way because obviously this is what works and this is what's effective. I also think that this kind of approach suggests a kind of research that is very different from teacher research in that it is probably large scale, such as randomized control trials or experiments. I just don't think those methods provide the kind of knowledge we really need to change things. I think we need to address poverty. I think we need to make sure everybody has health care. Now, [President] Obama's in favor of all that. The policies that I think have to be connected to education, I pretty much agree with him on, like health care and early childhood programs and prenatal care and programs for young babies. I think all of those things have to be in place in order to make education policies work. So I agree with many of his policies but not the education initiatives.

**Interviewers:** What do you think about charter schools?

**Cochran-Smith:** I think it's fair to say that charter schools are one of the favorite reform strategies for K-12 education. They are certainly receiving funding and applause, and they have a favored status in Obama's administration as well as in many state governments. They still comprise a small percentage of the public schools, though. We need to keep that in mind. The best research that I know of, national studies or studies that use a national sample, suggest that charter schools are not that effective. Something like 27 percent are better than comparable public schools. Then there's a large number that are about the same, and then there's another group—maybe 33 percent—that are worse. That is not compelling evidence that charter schools will save everything for everybody. So I don't think they are the answer. In addition, we know that charter schools tend to increase stratification, they tend not to serve special-needs students very well, and they tend to have an impact on who goes to school with whom. They are certainly a favorite approach right now, but I don't think they're the answer and I don't think they will ultimately solve the most important problems.

**Interviewers:** Do you have any final questions or comments?

**Cochran-Smith:** When we started doing the research for the book [Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2009], we were surprised at how widespread teacher research and practitioner inquiry are around the world. There are groups in schools, in school-university partnerships, in universities, in communities all over the globe, where people are using practitioner research as a vehicle for trying to examine their practice, for working with other people, and for addressing all kinds of complex issues. All of that was surprising to us because the United States especially, but other places as well, would seem to be horrible climates for practitioner research, for all of the contextual reasons I mentioned. And yet, there it is.

In this way, practitioner research is alive and well, even though in a variety of ways that's not what you would expect. We also learned that many of the practitioner research communities we tracked down or identified were working on issues related to diversity, equity, access, and equality; these seemed to be the big topics. I think that speaks to the fact that inquiry is a really useful approach to trying to deal with these questions, which I think are the most important questions of our time in terms of education. At the end of the book we said that there are ways to build on what we have and also extend the agenda—by linking with other communities, by deepening the work in local communities, and by collaborating with others who are engaged in larger social movements that aren't about practitioner research but share some of the same assumptions.

In a certain sense, this is a hard time to be an advocate of practitioner research. And yet, as we found, despite how negative it seems in certain ways there are many, many people engaged in this work. So that, I think, is important to keep in mind.

## REFERENCES

- Cochran-Smith, M. 2012. Composing a research life. *Action in Teacher Education* 34 (2): 99-110.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 1990. Research on teaching and teacher research: The issues that divide. *Educational Researcher* 19 (2): 2-11.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 1993. *Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 1999a. Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In *Review of research in education*, vol. 24, ed. A. Iran-Nejad and C. Pearson, 249-306. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 1999b. The teacher research movement: A decade later. *Educational Researcher* 28 (7): 15-25.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 2004. Practitioner inquiry, knowledge, and university culture. In *International handbook of research of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices*, ed. J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. LaBoskey, and T. Russell, 601-49. Amsterdam: Kluwer.
- Cochran-Smith, M., and S. Lytle. 2009. *Inquiry as stance: Practitioner research for the next generation*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ingersoll, R. M., and T. M. Smith. 2003. The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. *Educational Leadership* 60 (8): 30-33.